

The Value of Education in Prison: Beyond the Quantitative Data

Percy Levy

INTRODUCTION

My name is Percy Levy. For the last fifteen years, I have been incarcerated within the Washington State prison system. During this time, I have been continuously involved in prison educational programs – post-secondary, as well as vocational including, but not limited to, Janitorial Certification all the way up to obtaining an Associate of Arts degree. At some point during this educational journey, I gained an incredible sense of self-awareness that allowed me to evolve as a person. Not only was I expanding my worldview through reading, writing and arithmetic, but there was also an awakening of consciousness taking place. Simply put, the world started looking differently when viewed through a fact-based and analytical perspective. In essence, my nihilistic views of existence began to morph into a much more reasonable and rational view of the world, my place in it, as well as my responsibility to it. It is my hope that this article sheds light on the value of critical thinking and student-teacher interactions within the prison setting. My experiences as a student and as a teaching assistant for the past several years afford me some authority to write this article.

THE VALUE OF TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTION

Prison administrations across the country pay close attention to teacher-student interactions and with good reason. There is no disputing that such interactions may sometimes lead to the introduction of contraband and other inappropriate behaviours, and on very rare occasions, escape attempts. The truth is that miscreant and manipulative behaviour is simply part-and-parcel of the prison microcosm. However, it goes without saying, at least to any reasonable and conscionable person, that education in prison is an essential component of the rehabilitative and redemptive process.

Why is it important for prisoners to interact with teachers? Well, the answer is complicated, but definitely worth exploring. In short, teachers step into an environment where unspoken rules regarding how both prisoners and officers are to behave have stripped away the softer side of human existence. Instead of adhering to the status quo, teachers promote, encourage, and model normative social behaviour, often working against or ignoring the problematic

friction that exists between prisoners and officers, opposing gang factions, and conviction-based institutional hierarchies that position murderers and drug dealers at the top and child molesters at the bottom.

The idea that teachers must somehow rise above the “authority figure” conundrum is not a new one. Paulo Freire (2003, p. 165), in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, states,

From the outset, (the teacher’s) efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. (the teacher’s) efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the student in their relations with them.

In an environment that heavily promotes anti-authoritarian propaganda, unlike any other member of the prison staff, teachers are able to exercise authority in a way that prisoners can accept or admire by providing a little background information about where they are from and about their personal hobbies. This is in contrast to guards and other archetypal prison-authority figures who do not engage in the sharing of personal information, as per their training instructions, in order to maintain emotional distance from prisoners and to avoid establishing relationships of familiarity.

Once teachers have established a “personal relationship” with prisoners, positive things occur. I have personally seen this process play out many times. Prisoners come into class apprehensive and tentative, only to be transformed shortly thereafter into confident and enthusiastic students – sometimes even having to be calmed down during animated group discussions.

THE VALUE OF THE CLASSROOM SETTING

Sadly, education is not respected and valued as much as it should be amongst prison populations, with the exception of vocational programs such as a welding and automotive repair that offer more direct potential opportunities for employment. For the most part, prisoners believe that jobs outside of the blue-collar realm are unattainable. Some cite lack of experience and work history as an obstacle, whereas others cite their status as convicted felons as an obstacle, and of course there is a group who cite the defeatist belief that the world is against them, so why even try!

It is because of these negative views that prison classrooms are so important. They offer a space to escape the adverse opinions of prisoners and to find comfort in the positive energy that exists in the learning environment. The classroom offers a working space for teachers to engage minds that have gone hard and brittle as a result of poverty and criminalization so that they can become more open, critical, and reflexive. Lastly, classrooms are a place where prisoners are exposed to teaching figures that they come to trust and respect, and who are there to help them, rather than being there to enforce the dominate/subordinate roles that are the status quo in prison.

THE VALUE OF CRITICAL THINKING

Once a classroom is ready for learning, a teacher will steer discussions in a way that stimulates critical thinking. Even though students may not know the proper terminology and phrasing (academic jargon), they learn in an abstract way to appreciate the benefits of understanding causes and effects, unfair emotional appeals, hasty generalizations, and most importantly, the age-old problem of jumping to conclusions.

Critical thinking is the genesis of all positive change. That more prisons do not incorporate critical thinking as a core aspect of rehabilitation is an outright tragedy. To speak to a convict indoctrinated by criminal rhetoric requires understanding the flaws in his or her reasoning in order to move them away from what is too often the standard response to any opposition; namely, to become aggressive.

I have seen the satisfaction in teachers' eyes when hostile arguments turn into well-reasoned debates. Even more, I have seen the tipping point where students who pick up critical thinking skills roll their eyes at those students who continue to make flawed and unreasonable arguments and assertions. During these transformative moments I felt like the recidivism rate was receding by the minute.

CONCLUSION

If teachers are not allowed to come inside prisons and teach in classroom settings, many of these young, easily persuadable minds are doomed to get their education from hardened convicts teaching out on the big yard.

This, of course, is not a winning set of circumstances for anyone involved – convict, prison staff, or society as a whole.

REFERENCES

Freire, Paulo (2003) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Percy Levy is 46 year old African-American male who has been incarcerated for the past 15 years. During his incarceration, he obtained an Associate of Arts Degree, as well as published several books (African-American urban books with a message). He works as a teaching assistant in the AA program at the prison. In his spare time, he does his best to mentor those that are seeking mentorship.